New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

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"Wonderful Town"

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"Wonderful Town"

Journal American

February 26, 1953

Roz Is Terrific; Show Is Lovely

By JOHN McCLAIN

"WONDERFUL TOWN" is a great big brash and lovely musical, featuring the infectious drolleries of Rosalind Russell, a bright and competent libretto by Joseph Fields and Jerome Chodorov and an amiable score by Leonard Bernstein, Betty Comden and Adolph Green.

It opened at the Winter Garden Theatre last night and should remain in our midst indefinitely; it is the best song and dance offering of the season to date.

The authors have taken incidents from their earlier play "My Sister Eileen," added a few new sequences here and there, and thus contrived a pleasant and humorous pattern of adventures involving two sisters from Columbus, Ohio, who have come to conquer New York.

Utterly Captivated

Miss Russell, the elder and more sagacious, is constantly required to rush to the rescue of her sister, capably played by Edith Adams, whose featherheaded exploits lead her into endless difficulties with strange men. There is the earnest young manager of a drug store, a wolfish newspaper reporter and a dozen cadets from a Brizilian battleship, to name a few.

None of this makes any great sense, but it contributes toward a mood of general hilarity and provides a good character for Miss Russell (Hollywood's loss, our gain), who had the customers bellowing in the aisles long after the final curtain descended.

In the current tradition of cinema stars, Roz sings, dances and permits herself to be flung around the premises like a volley ball. Her voice is certainly no threat to Dinah Shore and her dances will not chase Helen Gallagher off the boards, but she manages both these departments with such robust and unaffected enthusiasm that one is utterly captivated.

Surrounding her are some highly effective players, especially Miss Adams, who is fresh and pretty and can really sing. George Gaynes, a fugitive from Civic opera, brings a strong and confident baritone to the role of the head man, and Dort Clark, Henry Lascoe, Jordan Bentley, Cris Alexander and Ted Beniades score solidly in supporting parts.

Another Hit

Of the numbers I was particularly entranced by "Ohio," a corny ballad sung by Miss Russell and Miss Adams; "Never Felt This Way Before," a pleasant little tune delivered by Miss Adams; "Conversation Piece," an interrupted chant revealing the difficulties of starting a story in an extraneous group; "A Quiet Girl" by George Gaynes; "Swing!" with Miss Russell; "The Wrong Note Rag," a big production number; the crowded ballet in the final night-club scene and, of course, "It's Love," the pop song of the show which sends you out humming.

Donald Saddler has done a commendable job with the choreography, notably the stop-action opening number and Miss Russell's later entanglement in the world of Greenwich Village hep cats.

Raoul Pene du Bois creates an effective downtown atmosphere in a series of sets and drops revealing a dreary Bohemian basement flat, the surrounding street and garden and, finally, the garish Village night club.

The whole proceedings are pervaded with a studied pace and precision, and a calculated appreciation of Miss Russell's skill as a comic, which must be credited to George Abbott, who directed.

The season is looking better —here's another hit.

"WONDERFUL TOWN"

Musical comedy based on the Joseph Fields-Jerome Chodorov comedy, "My Sister Eileen"; derived from the Ruth McKenney stories; book by Messrs. Fields and Chodorov; music by Leonard Bernstein; lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green; staged by George Abbott; dances by Donald Saddler; sets and costumes by Raoul Pene du Bois; lighting by Peggy Clark; presented by Robert Fryer at the Winter Garden, February 25, 1953. The cast:

Guide.....Warren Galjour
Appopolous.....Henry Lascoe
Lonigan.....Walter Kelvin
Helen.....Michele Burke
Wreck.....Jordan Bentley
Violet.....Dody Goodman
Valenti.....Ted Beniades
Eileen.....Edith Adams
Ruth.....Rosalind Russell
A Strange Man..Nathaniel Frey
Drunks.....Albert Linville
and Delbert Anderson
Robert Baker...George Gaynes
Mrs. Wade.....Isabella Hoopes
Frank Lippencott.....
Chris Alexander
Delivery Boy.....Alvin Bean
Chick Clark.....Dort Clark
Shore Patrolman....Lee Papell
First Cadet.....David Lober
Second Cadet.....Ray Dorian
Ruth's Escort...Chris Robinson

DAILY NEWS

February 26, 1953

'Wonderful Town' a Triumph for 'Roz' Russell, Leonard Bernstein

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"Wonderful Town"—wonderful score—wonderful book—wonderful Rosalind Russell—wonderful production—and wonderful Winter Garden Theatre, where I had a wonderful time last evening.

This new musical moves into my sentimental heart close alongside "Guys and Dolls" as one of the gayest, smartest shows of recent times. "Guys and Dolls" hymns the amiable grifters of Times Square, and "Wonderful Town" is a joyful paean to the scraggly denizens of Greenwich Village in the 1930s. In it Miss Russell is captivating. Here is no movie star making an expensive personal appearance; here is a comedienne who is perfectly at home in a Broadway musical—a thoroughly engaging, handsome and intelligently funny music-hall artist.

Bernstein's Work Superior.

Everybody connected with this extravaganza has done admirable work, and it seems to me that the star of the whole delightful lot is Leonard Bernstein, the composer of the music. There hasn't been much music in our musicals lately—nothing much to bother about, really, since Frank Loesser did the score for "Guys and Dolls"—and Bernstein has come to the rescue. With the fine assistance of Don Walker, the arranger, and a splendid orchestra led by Lehman Engel, Bernstein has achieved a Broadway show score of remarkable quality. Many times last evening I felt there hasn't been anybody around like him since George Gershwin for jauntiness, tricky and intriguing modulations and graceful swoops into simple and pleasant melody.

I imagine that Bernstein and his excellent lyric writers, Adolph Green and Betty Comden, have come up with some jukebox and bingcrosby hits like "It's Love" and "A Quiet Girl," but their principal aim has been to make songs and music fit the show. This fitness is what gives "Wonderful Town" a superior score—a record of and an intelligent comment upon the musical fads of two decades ago.

The book of "Wonderful Town" is fine to start with, being a useful adaptation of the Joseph Fields-Jerome Chodorov comedy, "My Sister Eileen," which was based on Ruth McKenney's hilarious stories about her kid sister. Miss Russell is Ruth and a charming blonde, Edith Adams, is Eileen. These two girls come from Ohio to make their way in New York, land in a dreadful basement apartment in Greenwich Village, and have exasperatingly funny misadventures with the denizens of this odd neighborhood.

Miss Russell Is Grand.

The opening number of "Wonderful Town," a series of tableaux depicting the arty and seamy sides of Christopher Street, immediately stamps this show as something individual and special. Nothing last evening let me down, and Miss Russell is simply grand. She can play comedy with poise, and she can go into an extravagant dance number like "Congai" or "Wrong Note Rag" with fabulous abandon. "Wrong Note Rag" is one of the funniest music-show numbers I have ever seen.

There are plenty of good singers and actors in the cast—George Gaynes, an excellent baritone for the "Quiet Girl" and "It's Love" numbers; Jordan Bentley as an ex-athlete, Ted Beniades as the operater of a Village night club, Dort Clark as a lustful newspaperman and many others.

George Abbott has staged "Wonderful Town" with the wit, skill and speed which are his trademark, and Raoul Pene duBois has done some fine sets and costumes. His set for the finale, a basement club in the Village, is nothing less than art—and something special, too, is an overcrowded dance staged on a typical small floor here by Donald Saddler.

The Winter Garden will be Miss Russell's Summer Garden, too.

The New York Times

February 26, 1953

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

According to the Constitution, Rosalind Russell cannot run for President until 1956. But it would be wise to start preparing for her campaign at once. For she can dance and sing better than any President we have had. She is also better looking and has a more infectious sense of humor.

She can remain in residence until 1956 at the Winter Garden. "Wonderful Town," which opened there last evening, is the most uproarious and original musical carnival we have had since "Guys and Dolls" appeared in this neighborhood. Joseph Fields and Jerome Chodorov have founded the book on their comedy, "My Sister Eileen," which was founded in turn on Ruth McKenney's wryly comic stories. That noble lineage in laughter accounts for the humorous literacy of the story.

* * *

But everyone is more inspired than usual in the administration of "Wonderful Town." Leonard Bernstein has written it a wonderful score. Dispensing with hurdygurdy techniques, he has written a bright and witty score in a variety of modern styles without forgetting to endow it with at least one tender melody and a good romantic number. Orchestrated by Don Walker, conducted by Lehman Engel, the score carries forward the crack-brained comedy of the book with gaiety and excitement.

If you remember that Mr. Bernstein also wrote the music for "On the Town" a decade ago, you will be glad to know that Betty Comden and Adolph Green are associated with him again. They have written some extraordinarily inventive lyrics in a style as unhackneyed as the music. And Donald Saddler has directed the most exuberant dances of the season. Sometimes gifted people never quite get attuned to each other in the composition of a musical circus. But in "Wonderful Town" everyone seems to have settled down joyfully to the creation of a beautifully organized fandango—the book, the score and the ballets helping each other enthusiastically. George Abbott, ring-master of numberless musical shows, has put everything together in a robust, high-spirited performance.

* * *

No doubt you know already that this is the saga of two sisters from Ohio who settle down in an aguish Greenwich Village basement as the first step toward achieving careers in New York. The musical version is a little more elaborate than the prose version, and it gives Raoul Pène du Bois an opportunity to design some congenial Village scenery, to say nothing of a whole wardrobe of fantastic costumes.

Despite the elaborations of the book, the experiences the sisters have in the Village are as bizarre as they were originally. They include a festive conga line with the Brazilian sailors that brings down the first act curtain on a notable rumpus. As Sister Eileen, Edith Adams is absolutely perfect. She is both demure and coquettish; she is simple and frank, good company and well mannered. And she sings with a sweetness that represents the character delightfully. The hill-billy lament for "Ohio" that Miss Russell and she sing early in the show is not merely funny: it tells with great skill the folk background of this sophisticated folk tale.

Everyone else is in the right key, also: George Gaynes as a magazine editor with a fine baritone voice; Dort Clark as an aggressively cynical newspaper man; Chris Alexander as a refined drugstore manager; Henry Lascoe as a combination fake painter and phony landlord; Ted Beniades as night-club charlatan. As restaurant cooks, waiters, cadets and assorted individuals, Nathaniel Frey, Delbert Anderson, David Lober and Ray Dorian are all right, too. As a husky, illiterate football player, Jordan Bentley is a very hearty buffoon. They make the Village a good deal more warmhearted and insane than it is in nature.

At the head of all this bedlam Miss Russell gives a memorably versatile comic performance. She is tall, willowy and gawky; she is droll, sardonic and incredulous. Her comedy can be broad and also subtle. For she radiates the genuine comic spirit. In "Wonderful Town" she makes the whole city wonderful; and she will make the whole country wonderful when she is elected President in 1956.

Daily Mirror

February 26, 1953

'Wonderful Town' Is Tasty, Tuneful, Masterly

By ROBERT COLEMAN

A great musical called "Wonderful Town" roared into the Winter Garden last evening like a hurricane, and left a brilliant first-night audience limp from applauding and hoarse from cheering. And the new toast of the town is its wonderful star, Rosalind Russell, who proves that she's as magnetic on stage as in the movies.

Robert Fryer, who sponsored "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," is the producer of this musical version of "My Sister Eileen." George Abbott has staged the new champ with spectacular skill, and Donald Saddler has equipped it with delightfully dizzy dances. Raoul Pene du Bois has provided backgrounds and costumes that set off the riotous romp to perfection.

IN ADAPTING their play for the song-and-dance stage, Joseph Fields and Jerome Chodorov have not only kept all the delirious fun that marked the original, but have added some masterly comedy touches into the bargain. Betty Comden and Adolph Green have penned superior lyrics to Leonard Bernstein's sensational score.

In retelling the story of the small-town sisters, devastating Eileen and reliable Ruth, who come to conquer New York, everyone involved has made marvelous contributions. The result is a lulu without a lull, as fast afoot as Man-o'-War, as gay and giddy as a Mardi Gras, plus a dash of persuasive sentiment.

We have been urging Hollywood stars to return to Broadway, and several of them have this season. With gratifying results. But of all those we've welcomed back, none has scored a more resounding triumph than "Roz", as Ruth. She had the premierites rolling in the aisles and blistering their palms. Her satiric Conga and zingy Swing convulsed them.

BLONDE EDITH ADAMS also won "bravas" as Eileen, of the baby face and innocent eyes, who has an irresistible way with men. She can sing, act, dance and soothe the eyes. She's got everything. George Gaynes who has sung in opera, is excellent as a sensible and helpful magazine editor.

Salutes also are due Jordan Bentley, Dort Clark, Henry Lascoe, Cris Alexander, Ted Beniades and Nathaniel Frey in other roles. In fact, we'd like to cite everyone in the company, but space prevents. But an appreciative bow must go to Lehman Engel's dynamic batoneering in the orchestra pit.

"Wonderful Town" should be packing the Winter Garden as long as Miss Russell wants to stay in our wonderful town. It's a superlative song-and-dancer, loaded with laughs and bursting with song. The songs and dances, incidentally, speed the action and move the story forward. It's gorgeous showmanship.

You'd better rush to buy your tickets, for they'll be selling at a premium. There is already an advance of $400,000 in the Winter Garden till, and that will be jumping by leaps and bounds. "Wonderful Town" is just what the doctor ordered for our Fabulous Invalid. A tasty, tuneful tonic.

W. W. says:

Hilarious!!!
Immense!!!
Terrific!!!

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

February 26, 1953

'Wonderful Town'

By WALTER F. KERR

NOW it's Rosalind Russell who has strayed off the Hollywood reservation, and New York couldn't be more in luck. It's never been any secret that Miss Russell could rear back, hoist her chin, look down her nose, and curl a wisecrack off her lower lip with withering magnificence. What she's been keeping from us is the open-armed abandon, the sheer animal spirits with which she can set a whole stage to rocking around her.

In "Wonderful Town," which swept gaily into the Winter Garden Wednesday, Miss Russell finds no fewer than four joyous opportunities for stopping the show in its well oiled tracks. This musical comedy version of "My Sister Eileen" is barely under way when the confident comedienne, playing a lass with literary ambitions and absolutely no talent for attracting the opposite sex, lights into a patter-number called "One Hundred Easy Ways to Lose a Man."

She couldn't have asked for a more felicitous introduction to Broadway. No one is going to pretend that Miss Russell's singing voice is much more than an amiable croak. But composer Leonard Bernstein has jauntily inflected the number to give this reedy but responsive wail all sorts of leeway, letting the punch-lines rocket off to no musical accompaniment whatever. And the star has gone him three or four better by phrasing her lyrics with infectious drollery, by acting them with enormous gusto. Miss Russell may never be quite able to sing a song; but she certainly knows how to animate one.

As the evening scurries along, this exuberant and apparently inexhaustible performer tears into an explosive conga, the while she is manhandled by half the Brazilian Navy. (When Hollywood visitors are hoisted into the air by a detachment of chorus boys, there is usually a certain grim panic about the operation; Miss Russell looks as though she could get up there any time she wanted to, and all by herself if necessary.) In the second act, she sets the beat for an exercise in rhythmic mayhem known as "Swing"—proving herself a past mistress of glassy-eyed jive—and, together with Edith Adams, she brings the final frenzied curtain down on a roi-